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By Harry Harris
The Tribune

As an Oakland police officer, Murray Hoyle faces danger and possible death every day by choice.

He makes that same choice today, but this time it's in a battered car on a dirt track that almost claimed his life a year ago.

Hoyle, 31, is again competing in the annual All Police Destruction Derby in Placerville. At last year's event, a leaking gas tank turned his car into a scorching oven that engulfed him in flames and left him burned over more than a third of his body.

"There will be a bit of apprehension, to be honest with you," admits the 230-pound Hoyle, whose arms and legs are permanently scarred.

"But I've forced myself to overcome other fears, and like anyone else I will not let fear alter what I am going to do."

Hoyle's near brush with death came last June 18, the fourth year he had competed in the police derby. He was driving a 1964 Chrysler Imperial he had rebuilt himself.

"I've got to take credit for the whole fire," Hoyle said wryly. "I built the car."

Rebuilding cars and racing them in demolition derbys are hobbies for the nine-year police department veteran.

Hoyle was one of four drivers to reach the half-way point in the 15-minute heat, which had started with a dozen cars.

He was not wearing any fire retardant clothing, just goggles, gloves, a T-shirt and fatigue pants.

Several earlier collisions had left the body of his car crumpled and had also loosened the brackets holding a 5-gallon can of fuel and car battery, both of which were inside the passenger compartment with Hoyle.

"Those are actually the safest places for them," he said.

During the derby, more jolts caused the metal fuel line at the bottom of the gas tank to sever and the fuel to begin spilling inside the car.

Another collision broke the brackets holding the battery, which fell against a piece of metal and arced, igniting the fuel.

"The battery was off to my right," Hoyle recalled. "I was actually trying to straighten it out when I saw it arc. I didn't

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know gas was leaking in the car, though."

The next thing Hoyle saw "was a shot of flames go across the floor" and then he was "engulfed in flames."

"I knew I had to get out," Hoyle said. "It was get out or die and I wasn't really thrilled with the second choice."

After unbuckling his safety harness, Hoyle was able to get out of the car, which by now was totally consumed by flames.

"From a seated position I just dove headfirst through the window and landed in the mud in a puddle of flames.

"As soon as I landed my pants were still on fire. I beat them out myself with my gloves. It's sur-

prising how quick you think when you're on fire."

Since the accident, race organizers have encouraged drivers to wear protective clothing. Rule changes also have been made on gas tank construction and battery insulation.

A videotape of the derby showed he was inside the burning car 10.4 seconds.

Hoyle said he was conscious the entire time and never really felt any pain. "There was a real strong stinging feeling at best, but basically your body goes into shock."

The first person to rush to Hoyle's aid was a Washoe County deputy sheriff who was driving the car that collided with Hoyle's and touched off the fire. Hoyle said he "pretty much just sat

there" and let others take care of him.

Hoyle was first taken to the U.C. Davis Burn Unit in Sacramento, where it was found he had third-degree burns over 34 percent of his body.

He spent the next 22 days undergoing three major skin graft operations.

Hoyle says that in his first few days at the hospital he was depressed and he feared he would not be able to resume his police career.

But his family, friends and co-workers were tremendously supportive. When Dr. Anne Missavage, his surgeon and director of the burn unit, reassured him he would be able to go back to work, "it made my day," he said.

What helped Hoyle recover,

Missavage said, was his good attitude and the fact that "he was motivated from the outset that he was going to be able to go back into police work."

Hoyle said city and police administrators have all been very supportive, which made coming back to work after three months of hospitalization a lot easier.

Before he was hurt, he was working as a patrol officer. When he returned, he spent nine months working light duty in the traffic division as an accident investigator and went back to full-duty status in March as a motorcycle officer.

"It's a matter of principle, like being thrown off a horse," Hoyle said. "You get back on the horse. I knew in the hospital I was going to drive again."

Oakland police officer, firefighter set wedding date

By Harry Harris
Tribune staff writer

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IT WASN'T LOVE at first sight, but from the ashes of last October's East Bay firestorm, a romance has blossomed.

And that means wedding bells soon for an Oakland police officer and a firefighter.

Officer Murray Hoyle and firefighter Kim Finger will wed Aug. 8 at a church near where

they first met Oct. 20.

Hoyle, 33, a motorcycle officer, said he not only never expected to meet his future wife on the job but also thought "I'd be single all my life. I'm kind of tough to get along with."

Finger, 26, whose father is a University of California police sergeant, likewise never thought she would meet her future husband at work.

"No, it was quite the opposite," she said. "I

was hoping I wouldn't meet someone on the job."

But, she said, "you can't deny yourself happiness and our compatibility is so great."

They first met Oct. 20 at the intersection of Lawton Avenue and Broadway. Hoyle was at a traffic post at the intersection after helping evacuate residents.

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thing. She was definitely not in a she has real good work ethics.

A fire lieutenant asked him to stay with Finger, who was sitting on a nearby lawn obviously in pain from a twisted knee, until an ambulance arrived.

"She had soot all over face. She was pretty dirty but cute as hell," Hoyle said.

Hoyle remembers asking if Finger wanted a soda, candy or a sandwich. "She refused everything. She was definitely not in a good mood. She had screwed up her knee, but she wanted to continue fighting the fire."

The ambulance finally arrived and Finger told paramedics in no uncertain terms she did not want to go to the hospital.

"She's hard-headed as a mule," Hoyle said. "They checked her out and she convinced them she was all right."

Hoyle said he had seen Finger once before at a downtown traffic accident. "She caught my eye then and when I saw her at the fire she definitely got my attention."

To break the ice a little, Hoyle asked Finger if she wanted some bubble gum. "Her eyes lit up and she said sure. I gave her the whole pack."

During the next five days their paths kept crossing in the fire zone and Hoyle eventually asked her out.

They met for breakfast near Jack London Square and a blushing Hoyle said, "I guess you could say it blossomed from there."

Finger said when she first saw Hoyle at the fire she was upset that a "police officer had been sent to take care of me. I wanted to go back to fighting fires."

"I felt like telling him, 'Get away from me. I don't want your help.' I really wasn't looking for conversation from him."

She said her attitude changed when he gave her the bubble gum. "He finally offered me something I like."

Finger said Hoyle initially asked her to dinner, but she told him that "daytime dates only" was her rule for the first one.

"I was initially apprehensive about dating him. Something my mom told me a long time ago: Don't go out with cops and don't marry one."

Finger's parents, Yolanda and Phillip, have been married almost 35 years.

At the breakfast date, Finger said three-quarters of Hoyle's

conversation was about his pickup truck. "I figured he was harmless at that point."

They started dating more and finally, at a fire department Christmas party Dec. 19, Hoyle asked her to marry him — and she said yes.

Hoyle said he decided to pop the question for a variety of reasons. "I love her, she's very physically fit, we both like the outdoors, woodworking, and one thing that really attracted me is she has real good work ethics. She never calls in sick and the other firefighters respect her."

He said Finger was reluctant to accept his passion for demolition derbies because he was severely burned in one three years ago. But after going to one with him earlier this year she got the bug and now wants to drive, Hoyle said.

Finger said their courtship was a bit more romantic than that.

"We had briefly kind of teasingly talked about getting married. When he asked at the party it kind of surprised me. I thought he was kidding me. But he convinced me when he called his brother in Ukiah from the party and told him."

Aside from the fact she loves Hoyle very much, Finger said she accepted his proposal because "we have a lot in common. We both like the outdoors, being in the country and getting our hands dirty."

Also "our sense of humor is compatible. We make each other laugh."

"I felt pretty special because all his friends couldn't believe Murray Hoyle was getting married. He's really got to mean it. He really made me feel very special," she said.

The significance of their relationship beginning during the tragedy of the fire, where a police officer and a battalion fire chief were among the 25 killed, is not lost on them.

Said Finger: "I guess you can say it's a miracle in itself this happened to me during a tragic part of the city's history. But it is good that some happiness can come out of it."

Hoyle said: "It's somewhat unique, the silver lining through the dark cloud. We lost (police officer) John Grubensky and they lost Chief (James) Riley and that put a damper on everything. You can't be happy the fire happened, but I'm happy I met her."